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ABSTRACT

Stress is experienced by college students at different educational levels, but colleges can help reduce its destructive forms. There are explanations of why students perform badly under stress, such as "hypervigilance" (i.e., overstudying for an exam) and "premature closure" (i.e., rushing through an exam). Situations that are stressful for undergraduates, and for graduate, law, and medical students and residents are cited. Ways to reduce the negative aspects of stress (distress), include providing students with a feeling of control over their education, giving them information about what to expect, and offering feedback regarding what can be done to improve their own performance. Students who do not feel helpless will adopt their own coping strategies. (LB)

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Student Stress: Effects and Solutions •

by Neal A. Whitman, David C. Spendlove, and Claire H. Clark, University of Utah School of Medicine

What Is Stress and How Does It Affect Students?

Stress is any situation that evokes negative thoughts and feelings in a person. The same situation is not evocative or stressful for all people, and all people do not experience the same negative thoughts and feelings when stressed. One model that is useful in understanding stress among students is the person-environment model. According to one variation of this model, stressful events can be appraised by an individual as "challenging" or "threatening" (Lazarus 1966). When students appraise their education as a challenge, stress can bring them a sense of competence and an increased capacity to learn. When education is seen as a threat, however, stress can elicit feelings of helplessness and a foreboding sense of loss.

A critical issue concerning stress among students is its effect on learning. The Yerkes-Dodson law (1908) postulates that individuals under low and high stress learn the least and that those under moderate stress learn the most. A field study (Silver 1968) and laboratory tests (Hockey 1979) support the notion that excessive stress is harmful to students' performance.

Mechanisms that explain why students perform badly under stress include "hypervigilance" (excessive alertness to a stressful situation resulting in panic—for example, overstudying for an exam) and "premature closure" (quickly choosing a solution to end a stressful situation—for example, rushing through an exam).

What Is Stressful for Undergraduates?

Students react to college in a variety of ways. For some students, college is stressful because it is an abrupt change from high school. For others, separation from home is a source of stress. Although some stress is necessary for personal growth to occur, the amount of stress can overwhelm a student's ability to cope.

Since World War II, changes in American higher education include growth in the size and complexity of institutions and increased diversity among students. A consequence of that rapid growth has been a loss of personal attention to students. One measure of excessive stress, that is, *distress*, in college students is the use of mental health services. Although some students may bring psychiatric problems to the college campus, symptoms commonly reported by campus psychiatrists portray a general picture of school-related stress, for example, the inability to do school work and the fear of academic failure (Ellis 1969).

A second measure of distress in college students is the dropout rate. Although nationwide figures are difficult to obtain, it is estimated that 50 percent of entering freshmen do not finish college four years later (Hirsch and Keniston 1970). Studies of college dropouts associate dropping out with the aversive side of the "fight or flight" formula; that is, students, feeling a mismatch between themselves and their college, wish to distance themselves from the source of stress, the college environment (Falk 1975; Hirsch and Keniston 1970; Katz et al. 1969).

Solutions suggested for reducing distress in college students include "stress inoculation"—for example, informing students in advance of what difficulties they might face and encouraging them to develop their own strategies to achieve personal goals. Other suggestions include improving campus mental health services and organizing peer counseling and self-help groups.

What Is Stressful for Graduate Students?

The accelerated growth in undergraduate programs has also been felt in graduate schools, resulting in an oversupply of Ph.D.s. Consequently, graduate students, facing poor employment opportunities when they finish their doctoral programs, feel stress associated with the uncertainty of their career choice and future prospects.

Often, graduate students perceive that faculty exert great power over their lives and feel that they live in a state of substantial powerlessness (Altbach 1970). Another source of stress is the difficulty of achieving social intimacy. Either it is difficult to find a mate or maintain a relationship with an existing one. Graduate students tend to lack the time, the opportunity, or both to develop interpersonal relationships (Hartshorn 1976).

Specific tasks that produce stress in graduate students are preliminary exams and the doctoral dissertation. Fear of academic failure related to these tasks is a definite stressor (Kjerulff and Wiggins 1976; Kolko 1980).

Solutions for alleviating distress include improved orientation for new graduate students, more flexibility in core requirements, and expanding the role of faculty advisors.

What Is Stressful for Law Students?

The Socratic method, developed at Harvard in the 1870s, still characterizes law education today. Certain problems are associated with the approach, however. It puts the teacher in complete control of the

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classroom, leaving students with little control over how they relate to the material being taught in class. Related to the Socratic method is the issue of feedback. Law students receive little feedback in class and little feedback about their academic performance until after first semester exams (Ellinwood, Mayerson, and Paul 1983).

Law students feel that grades are emphasized excessively and see the law school as a screening program for law firms, the best of which interview only students who have made law review. Often, when students do not rank near the top of their class at the end of the first semester, they give up trying because their best efforts were not rewarded (Silver 1968).

In an effort to deal with the lack of feedback, some students rely on bogus feedback; for example, students who do well in an ungraded legal writing seminar believe they will rank high in the class. The extent to which students rely upon false feedback to relieve their anxieties might be counterproductive if they begin to avoid adequate preparation for exams.

Suggestions to relieve distress among law students include giving earlier and more frequent exams, providing positive feedback in class, deemphasizing grades, and basing appointment to the law review on writing skills rather than on class rank (Ellinwood, Mayerson, and Paul 1983).

What Is Stressful for Medical Students and Residents?

Medical education includes four years of medical school and three to five years of residency training in a teaching hospital. Premedical education in college is in itself stressful because of the keen competition to get into medical school. Competition continues in medical school among students eager to get into the residency program of their choice. For some residents, competition continues for those who wish to earn the status of "chief resident" in the program and to win a postresidency fellowship.

A major stressor for first-year medical students is the amount and complexity of material to be learned. Students feel academic pressure because nearly all their classmates were superior college students (Gaensbauer and Mizner 1980). Fatigue is often cited as a stressor in the second year, and many researchers describe a hypochondriacal phenomenon by which medical students imagine they have the disease they are studying (Bojar 1971; Saslow 1956).

In the third year, medical students begin patient care, but they are low on the totem pole. Acceptance of death and dying emerges as a key issue in coping with stress. For some medical students, the clinical years become routine and the fourth year is less stressful.

When medical school graduates enter the first year of residency training (the internship), they find themselves again low on the totem pole, and overwork and sleep deprivation become major stressors. Lack of personal time continues to stress residents in their second and third years.

Solutions to help medical students and residents cope with stress include improving orientation for first-year medical students and residents. Better counseling and more support groups are recommended. Providing more free time in the medical school curriculum and residency training is often cited, but the requirements to achieve competency in medicine seem to preclude major reductions in the workload.

What Overall Approaches Are Recommended?

Stress is necessary to challenge students to learn. What is needed are approaches to reduce the negative aspects of stress (distress) that lessen students' learning and performance. The key to reducing distress is providing students with a feeling of control over their education, information about what to expect, and feedback regarding what can be done to improve their performance. Students who do not feel helpless will adopt their own coping strategies.

Reactive coping, that is, dealing with one's own thoughts and feelings, can be facilitated by accessible professional and peer counseling, student support groups, and adequate faculty advising. Active coping, that is, dealing with the actual stressful situations or events, can be strengthened by providing students with early success.

Good teaching can not be overestimated as a key to preventing and minimizing distress among students. Of course, faculty may not be good teachers if they are themselves stressed and if they feel unrewarded for good teaching. How to reduce stress among faculty and reward good teaching are questions for further study.

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